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ABSTRACT

How does a hiring committee define the requisite knowledge essential for a writing program administrator (WPA)? A survey of writing program administrators revealed that typical WPAs begin their academic career by taking a B.A. in English and then proceeding on a more or less predictable course with an M.A. in English and a Ph.D. in English, specializing in a traditional field of English or American literature and writing their dissertations on a subject in medieval studies (20%), Victorian (15%), or American literature (20%). The wording of advertisements recruiting people whose teaching responsibilities can easily be converted to literature positions conveys an institutional skepticism about the continuing role of writing programs. In soliciting an administrator, ads should ask for "professional specialization and college-level teaching experience in composition and rhetoric." Given the fact that a composition specialist may acquire that specialization without the acquisition of any administration skills or talents, carefully assessing the administrative experience the WPA candidate describes in his or her curriculum vitae (c.v.) is also essential. In one specific case, a candidate was interviewed and hired whose experience and knowledge fully supported the "story-telling" of his c.v. and dossier package. In 1997 it is possible to hire candidates who freely come to composition as their disciplinary home, rather than some temporary shelter propped in place by the contingencies of marketplace conditions. (CR)

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Title: "The C.V. as Storytelling Instrument: Identifying the Composition Specialist"
Presenter: Anne Herzog

What does it mean in the late 1990's to be professionally trained in Composition? How does a hiring committee define the requisite knowledge essential for a Writing Program Administrator? How can we discern between fiction and reality when reading through hundreds upon hundreds of carefully crafted c.v.'s?

When Al France, Chris Teutsch, and I began our search committee work towards the hiring of a new Director of Composition at West Chester University, we were in full agreement that our program and our department were in quite desperate need of a new faculty member who would be unequivocally and unabashedly committed to Composition as a legitimate field of inquiry and practice. The origins of our hiring "need" were department specific and yet, typical of the majority of English Departments in the United States today. West Chester University's English Department, like so many others, has labored long under a history of literary bias against--indeed, outright disdain toward Composition as a professional field of study. One unfortunate near-recent chapter in our departmental history was the hiring of two previous Composition Administrators who abandoned the department's "unwanted child" as soon as they were awarded tenure and promotion, moving on to the legitimacy of literary endeavors. Thus, our 1994-1995 search for a Composition Director took on great significance specifically around the

question of identifying a genuine specialist in Composition and Rhetoric. We needed the "real thing," and not just a candidate who could weave a good tale on his/her c.v.

One anecdote from our hiring year may serve here to illustrate the importance of carefully "reading" one's candidates for a clearly established identity within the field of Composition and Rhetoric. One of our short list candidates, Ph.D. in hand, was working in an administrative capacity as an Assistant Director of Composition under a major figure in the field today. This candidate's portfolio impressed our hiring committee to the extent that we selected him for one of our 4 C's interview slots; he did not, however, make our short list for on-campus interviewing. Months later, I had a conversation with him in which he solicited feedback on his performance at the interview. He wanted to know, in essence, "what went wrong." When I told him that my colleagues and I were not persuaded as to the level of his commitment to Composition--he had not been publishing at all in Composition and had only given a small number of conference presentations related to the field--and thus were reluctant to trust his self-presentation as a "composition specialist," he responded by saying that, in fact, what he was *really* hoping for was a position in American Literature. He did not want to jeopardize such a position by tainting (my word here) his dossier with an substantial evidence of scholarly work in Composition. Caveat emptor.

So, what does a search committee need to know in order to assess which candidates are legitimate Composition specialists? How can we define specialization in any precise way when the very field is constantly evolving, without any fixed core identity or central propositions? From a 1987 vantage point, Steven North asserted in his

The Making of Knowledge in Composition: Portrait of an Emerging Field that " . . . it began to seem as if the field didn't have a core or a center: there seemed to be no way to frame its central problems, nor any method by which to set about trying to resolve them" (Preface n.p.). In 1997, the field is still diffuse and disparate in its interests. The center still refuses to hold.

Some historical background may be helpful here. First of all, as recently as 1987, a survey of Writing Program Administrators revealed that,

> The typical WPA begins his academic career by taking a B.A. in English and then proceeding on a more or less predictable course: M.A. in English, Ph.D. in English. . . . most WPAs trace their academic origins to English departments. The typical WPA, moreover, specializes in a traditional field of English or American literature, writing his dissertation on a subject . . . in medieval studies (20%), Victorian (15%), or American literature (20%). (Peterson 12)

Furthermore, in his 1991 analysis of the disadvantageous ways in which *The MLA Job Information List* constructs future Writing Program Administrators, Joseph Janangelo states that one major problem glaringly evident in these advertisements is their insistence that "expertise in both composition **and** literary studies" is essential for any qualified candidate. Janangelo concludes that,

> Job advertisements for Writing Program Administrator positions that make statements like "Background in literature preferred" . . . make larger statements about the precarious position of Writing Program Administrators in American higher education. They also convey an institutional skepticism about the

> continuing role of writing programs at century's end. By recruiting people whose teaching responsibilities can be easily converted to full-time literature positions, these schools are insuring themselves and the people they hire against the possibility that the institutional phenomenon of a writing program may someday become extinct. (64)

While Janangelo's suppositions as to the logic behind the *JIL*'s advertisements for Writing Program Administrators may be true in some cases, I read in such hedging in professional specialization--forcing all candidates to straddle the literature/composition divide--as more fundamentally rooted in the elitist biases of Literature as a discipline which looks askance at the credentials of any candidate who presents only Composition and Rhetoric credentials. Conservative Literature faculty are frequently threatened by the very presence of a Composition colleague whose interests and actions within the department are likely to challenge the slicing of the departmental pie. If such faculty can be assured of some common ground with said candidates, in this case, an investment in both Literature and Composition, they are much more likely to accept that individual's legitimate presence in the department.

In Andrea Lunsford's, Helene Moglen's, and Jim Slevin's *The Future of Doctoral Studies in English* (1989), numerous essayists argue for the affirmation of common ground between Composition and Literature. Thus, one could turn again to the *JIL* advertisements I have been criticizing and suggest that they might also reflect our hope for a less embattled future. Reflecting on the self-analysis completed by the MLA's Commission on the Future of the Profession, the editors of The *Future of Doctoral*

Studies in English note hopefully in their introduction that factionalization within our profession might now, finally, be addressed and ideally, resolved for the good of all parties concerned. They state, " . . . teachers of writing and teachers of literature [have] begun to recognize the same institutional structures and pedagogical practices that [have] traditionally separated them [have] also disguised a similarity of theoretical assumptions that could potentially form the basis of a vital new alliance" (v). Instead of the oppositional and divisive arguments typifying our relations up to the present, contributor Gary Waller suggests that we could begin a "polylogue," an opening up of the conversation, more voices and interests to be, finally, heard. Further supporting this metaphor, Waller writes: "Any policy of separate development produces the well known effects of an apartheid system--the exploitation of one dominant group by another" (117). I find myself non-persuaded by the voices of optimism in this collection. The ideal is attractive enough, yes. But while the system of exploitation remains firmly in place--and whether or not one finds these department structures and policies abborhent enough to accept the analogy to apartheid--an assertion of common ground, a genuine belief in common goals, will not result in the dismantling of the system itself. And I cannot move from such projections of more peaceful departmental relations in the near future to the advocacy of what I might call here, the hybrid candidate, the Composition and Literature specialist. I agree, rather, with Susan Miller that when we seek to hire a Composition Director, and not solely a Composition specialist, we are seeking an individual who will literally "embody" Composition--including all of the ambivalence and resistance surrounding our discipline--within the academy and within one's department (159).

Looking back on our advertisement for a Composition Director, I was pleased to note that we did not solicit an administrator who could also prove literary legitimacy; we asked, rather for "professional specialization and college-level teaching experience in composition and rhetoric." In drafting our screening instruments for the narrowing of the applicant pool, we highlighted and valued evidence of training in Composition (including graduate courseware, workshops, institutes), college level composition teaching, and composition scholarship of any kind (reflected in both publication and conference participation). Ultimately, it was the first and third of these items--training and scholarship--which were most revealing in terms of a candidate's commitment to the field. As we all know, most major research institutions sytematically utilize graduate students at large to staff Composition courses throughout the curriculum. Such teaching may indicate nothing more than a particular institution's levity in exploiting the graduate student body as a bargain-priced, readily available, minimally qualified instructional pool. Similarly, enrollment in a single course in the Teaching of Composition may indicate nothing more than the requisite qualification for membership in this instructional pool.

Much has changed in the last decade or so in terms of the availability of advanced training in Composition and Rhetoric at the Doctoral level. According to Steven North's chronology, "with very few exceptions, there were no graduate program in Composition before the mid-1970s" (preface n.p.). Yet, in Bettina Huber's "A Report on the 1986 Survey of English Doctoral Programs in Writing in Literature," 33% of departments surveyed "report that they have doctoral programs in rhetoric, writing, and composition"

and "an additional 6% of the respondents" planned to institute such programs (Lunsford 123). Composition has radically evolved in the decade subsequent to North's book's publication. A significant number of our applicants had multiple courses in Rhetoric and Composition, Composition Theory, and Pedagogies of Writing as part of their required--not optional--doctoral level coursework. Numbers of candidates wrote dissertations which were clearly and not tangentially based within the disciplinary boundaries of Composition. It simply was not the case that the majority of our applicants were literary transplants which seems to have been much more the norm a decade ago.

In "The Graduate Student as Apprentice WPA: Experiencing the Future," published in 1991, Trudelle Thomas notes that the training of graduate students pays "virtually no attention to their future responsibilities as administrators" (41). And this leads me to my final point in the process of hiring a Composition Specialist as a Writing Program Director. Given the fact that a Composition specialist may acquire that specialization without the acquisition of any administrative skills or talents, carefully assessing the administrative experience of the WPA candidate is essential. In our case, both of our screening instruments included specific categories for identifying candidates who could bring administrative experience to West Chester. In actuality, we were rather suspicious readers of the administrative claims of some applicants, as each of us knew firsthand the kinds of empty administrative positions many Graduate Programs establish precisely with the aim of providing their Ph.D. candidates with additional credentials, and thus, a competitive edge when facing the current market. In our case, we were fortunate enough to interview and then hire a candidate who had been employed for eight years as a

full-fledge Director of Composition at a comparably sized University. The substance, breadth, and legitimacy of his administrative experience, as well as his solid commitment to Composition were more than apparent to our hiring committee as we moved into the final stages of his hiring. We were fortunate to be able to pursue and hire a candidate whose experience and knowledge fully supported the "story-telling" of his c.v. and dossier package. If it is true that the majority of the field's administrators and specialist came to Composition by " accident, coercion, or choice," a decade ago, it is in face possible in 1997 to hire candidates who freely come to Composition as their disciplinary home, rather than some temporary shelter propped in place by the contingencies of marketplace conditions.

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